

7 PILLARS OF WISDOM

One of my employees returned from a training course about two weeks ago. The programme she had attended was to teach her how to assess managerial capability at various levels - in other words levels of work. On the post-course de-brief she described her experience as truly amazing as it had completely altered her understanding of manpower management. "Now I get it", she said, "Strategic leadership is not about intelligence - its about dealing with uncertainty." Bingo!

Let me share with you the theory that so fascinated her about levels of work. We all know that H₂O is always H₂O, but can be present in the form of ice, water, or steam based on temperature. Similarly work is work but can be present in various states based on its complexity level. We all know intuitively that some jobs are more complex than others. However, most of us lack a universal way of measuring and, thus, articulating, what makes one job more complex than another, yet it is crucial in assessing competency, when recruiting externally or promoting from within an organisation.

Work in hierarchical organizations occurs in distinct layers of increasing complexity that can be easily distinguished from one another. The work required in each layer is qualitatively different from the work in any other layer. Once we understand this, we can begin to talk about jobs (any job, from zookeeper to bank teller) in terms of these levels, called strata. When we understand that some jobs are more complex than others and what it is that makes them so, we can begin to look at people's ability to handle certain levels of complexity. Once again, we all know intuitively that some people can handle more complexity than others, but identifying and articulating what makes one person more capable than another can be difficult.

This is especially so when we are confused about what complexity is or isn't. It's a complex issue! Complexity and difficulty are sometimes used interchangeably and viewed as same thing but this is not so. Work can be exceptionally difficult without it being complex. Complexity isn't what is known, but more precisely what is not known. The more abstraction (or fuzziness) in a job the more we are required deal with the unknown and thus the higher our level of complexity.

The greater the number of variables that need to be taken into account at work, the more ambiguous and intangible they are, the more they interact and intertwine and have to be separated, the more complex the problem.

It has been formulated that there are seven general levels of work altogether and yet many companies are not aware of this. They see management as one level so its no wonder they struggle to understand why some managers fail to perform when promoted to the next level. You've all heard the expressions 'management by crisis' but this is more 'crisis by management'. Companies can create their own chaos by not appreciating that people have their own glass competency ceiling and that breaking the glass is not a good idea.

First level work involves concrete hands-on tasks where rules and policies have been clearly spelt out, leaving very little room for mistakes. This level of work takes place in a highly structured environment; this is where you would typically find your manual labourers and those who do routine jobs such as working on a production line, maintaining equipment etc. But wait, this is also where you may find specialists. Because complexity and difficulty are two different things you may find very clever people operating very well in a level 1 complexity job where the need is to follow a set way of doing things and where deviation will cause problems. A typical example would be a surgeon performing what are regarded as routine operations such as a tonsillectomy, a procedure that takes little time to perform and has a low level expectation of complications. Difficult, yes, complex, no.

The second level of work calls for less structure where the individual has parameters in which to work, allowing them the needed flexibility to apply their judgment on how to handle the situation at hand. People working in this level may be dentists, teachers and other technical or supervisory positions. And so it goes on upwards. As the complexity of the job increases, so more variables need to be taken into account. The final levels (6 & 7) are where you would find leaders of multinationals and world leaders operating. Theirs is a world of constant abstraction or uncertainty, having to grapple with the complexities of the big picture. They have to able to view every aspect of that big picture at the same time and then mentally separate, compartmentalise, prioritise and take the big decisions. If level 1 is a single game of draughts, theirs is a series of 3-dimensional chess games all being played simultaneously.

When people operate at a work level within their capability they are deemed to be in flow. But If an employee is put in a job with a higher level of complexity than they can deal with they are out of flow and if they have no potential for complexity growth, no amount of knowledge, training or personal coaching can equip them to handle the work. This results in frustration, inefficiency and apparent incompetence . Similarly if an employee with is asked to do work at a lower complexity than his capability, issues surrounding boredom will arise. These employees are prime candidates for turnover as they seek out other organisations who will recognise their higher level capabilities.

This is a serious and widespread problem. Research suggests that one fifth of corporate employees are under-utilised in this manner and don't imagine for one moment that your organisation is the exception to the rule. The chances are that you have prime examples of each scenario amongst your workforce right now but that need not be the case. Both problems are entirely predictable and completely avoidable if we take the time to assess employees' complexity capability and match this with what is required of the job.

For years we have blamed lack of leadership (even when we weren't sure what is was) and poor strategic capability (whatever that was) for managers' failure to perform. But the real culprit is a person's inability to deal in unfamiliar territories. Not everyone is comfortable stripping off experience and qualifications and relying on judgment and discretion. To give of their best we should recognise that everyone has their own upper limit, their own level of competency, their own glass ceiling. So ask yourself this. Would you rather be saddled with Seven Deadly Sins or try and find the supreme happiness that is promised when we reach the mystical, magical Seventh Heaven!

